

Article (grammar)

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An **article** is a word that combines with a noun to indicate the type of reference being made by the noun. The three main articles in the English language are *the*, *an* and *a*. An article is sometimes called a *noun marker*, although this is generally considered to be an archaic term.^[1]

It is sometimes wondered which part of speech articles belong to. Despite much speculation, articles are not adjectives because they don't describe nouns; they just agree with them. Linguists place them in a different category, that of determiners.

Articles can have various functions:^[2]

- A **definite article** (English *the*) is used before singular and plural nouns that refer to a particular member of a group.

The cat is on the black mat.

- An **indefinite article** (English *a*, *an*) is used before singular nouns that refer to any member of a group.

A cat is a mammal.

- A **partitive article** indicates an indefinite quantity of a mass noun; there is no partitive article in English, though the words *some* or *any* often have that function.

French: *Voulez-vous du café ?* ("Do you want **some** coffee?" or "Do you want coffee?")

- A **zero article** is the absence of an article (e.g. English indefinite plural), used in some languages in contrast with the presence of one. Linguists hypothesize the absence as a zero article based on the X-bar theory.

Cats are mammals.

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Logic of definite articles

In English, a definite article is mostly used to refer to an object or person who has been previously introduced. For example:

At last they came to a piece of rising ground, from which they plainly distinguished, sleeping on a distant mountain, a mammoth bear. . . . Then they requested the eldest to try and slip the belt over the bear's head. . . .

— Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, appendix D

In this example, a bear becomes *the bear* because a "mammoth bear" had been previously introduced into the narrative, and no other bear was involved in the story. Only previously introduced subjects like "the bear" or unique subjects, where the speaker can assume that the audience is aware of the identity of the referent (*The heart has its reasons. . .*) typically take definite articles in English.

By contrast, the indefinite article is used in situations where a new subject is being introduced, and the speaker assumes that the hearer is not yet familiar with the subject:

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. . . .

— A traditional nursery rhyme

Reflecting its historical derivation from the number word *one*, the English indefinite article can only be used with singular count nouns. For mass nouns, or for plurals, adjectives or adjective phrases like *some* or *a few* substitute for it. In English, pronouns, nouns already having another non-number determiner, and proper nouns usually do not use articles. Otherwise in English, unlike many other languages, singular count nouns take an article; either *a*, *an*, or *the*.^[3] Also in English word order, articles precede any adjectives which modify the applicable noun.

In French, the masculine definite article *le* (meaning *the*) is contracted with a following word if that word begins with a vowel sound. When the French words *de* and *le* are to be used sequentially (meaning *of the*), the word *du* is used instead, in addition to the above mentioned use of *du* as a partitive article.

In various languages other than English, masculine and feminine forms of articles differ. Singular and plural forms of articles can also differ in other languages. Many languages do not use articles at all, and may use other ways of indicating old vs. new information, such as topic-comment constructions.

The

The word ***the*** is the only definite **article** of the English language. *The* is the most common word in the English language.^[4]

The article *the* is used in English as the very first part of a noun phrase. For example:

The end of time begins now.

Here "the end of time" is a noun phrase. The use of *the* signals that the reference is to a specific and unique instance of the concept (such as person, object, or idea) expressed in the noun phrase. Here, the implication is that there is one end of time, and that it has arrived.

The time is 3:29 PM.

There are many times, but the meaning here is the time *now*, of which (at the moment the sentence was produced) there is only one.

Etymology

Linguists believe that the common ancestor of the Indo-European languages (i.e., the Proto-Indo-European language) did not have a definite article. Most of the languages in this family do not have definite or indefinite articles; there is no article in Latin, Sanskrit, Persian or in some modern Indo-European languages, especially in Slavic languages - Polish, Russian, Slovak and Czech, etc (the only Slavic languages that have articles are Bulgarian and Macedonian) and in the Baltic languages - Latvian, Lithuanian and Latgalian. Errors with the use of *the* and other determiners are common in people learning English (e.g., native Czech-speaker Ivana Trump, first wife of Donald Trump, referring to him as "the Donald"). Classical Greek has a definite article (which happens to be very similar to the definite article in German, but with *t* instead of German *d*), but Homeric Greek did not. In the etymologies of these and many other languages, the definite article arose by a demonstrative pronoun or adjective changing its usage; compare the fate of the Latin demonstrative "ille" (meaning "that") in the Romance languages, becoming French *le*, *la*, *l'*, and *les*, Spanish *el*, *la*, *lo*, *los*, and *las*, Italian *il*, *la*, *lo*, *l'*, *i*, *gli*, and *le*, and Portuguese *o*, *os*, *a*, and *as*.

The and *that* are common developments from the same Old English system. Old English had a definite article *se*, in the masculine gender, *seo* (feminine), and *þaet* (neuter). In Middle English these had all merged into *þe*, the ancestor of the Modern English word *the*.

In Middle English *the* (*þe*) was frequently abbreviated as a *þ* with a small *e* above it, similar to the abbreviation for *that*, which was a *þ* with a small *t* above it. During the latter Middle English and Early Modern English periods, the letter Thorn (*þ*) in its common script, or cursive, form came to resemble a *y* shape. As such the use of a *y* with an *e* above it as an abbreviation became common. This can still be seen in reprints of the 1611 edition of the King James Version of the Bible in places such as Romans 15:29, or in the Mayflower Compact. Note that the article was never pronounced with a *y* sound, even when so written.

Reduction and omission

The article is not used in prepositional phrases that refer to travelling to certain places in order to participate in an activity related to the place. You may, for example, "go to school". Here, we assume this refers a teacher or pupil who will be giving or attending classes. A parent visiting a teacher or collecting a child would go "to *the* school" as he or she will not be engaged in the normal activity of schooling. Furthermore, while the child would presumably receive equivalent education at most other schools, the parent must go to the particular school in which his child is enrolled: the child can only be collected from *the* school that he attends. Similarly, you will need to "go to hospital" after sustaining an injury, while anyone subsequently visiting you would be going "to the hospital", as they must go to *the* particular hospital where you are. In American English (as opposed to the latter usage of British English), the article is never omitted as either case would be referred to as going to "a hospital" or "the hospital." However, one would not talk about "going to cinema" even if your purpose is to participate in the typical activity related to the place (that is, to watch a film).

In news headlines and informal writing, such as notes or diaries, the definite article and some other particles are often omitted, for example, "*Must pick up prescription at pharmacy today.*"

In some Northern England dialects of English, *the* is pronounced as [t̬ə] (with a dental t) or as a glottal stop, usually written in eye dialect as <t>; in some dialects it reduces to nothing. This is known as definite article reduction; see that article for further details.

In dialects that do not have /ð/ (voiced dental fricative), *the* is pronounced with a voiced dental plosive, as in /də/ or /di:/).

Country names

In English most countries never take the definite article, but there are many that do. It is commonly used with many country names which derive from names of island groups (the Philippines), mountain ranges (the Lebanon), deserts (the Sudan), and other geographic expressions (the Netherlands). Such use is declining, but for some countries it remains common. Since the independence of Ukraine, most style guides have advised dropping the article, in part because the Ukrainian government was concerned about a similar issue involving prepositions.

The U.S. Department of State [1] (<http://www.state.gov/misic/list/>) and CIA World Factbook [2] (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2142.html>) show the definite article with only two countries: The Bahamas and The Gambia.

See also

- A, an
- Definiteness
- Definite description
- Determiner (class)
- Al-
- Teh

References

1. ^ Articles, Determiners and Quantifiers (<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/determiners/determiners.htm>)
2. ^ The Use and Non-Use of Articles (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/elsart.html>)
3. ^ Sidney Greenbaum, *The Oxford English Grammar* (Oxford University Press, 1996) ISBN 0-19-861250-8
4. ^ World English. The 500 Most Commonly Used Words in the English Language (<http://www.world-english.org/english500.htm>). Retrieved on 2007-01-14.

External links

- Vietnamese learners mastering english articles (<http://dissertations.ub.rug.nl/FILES/faculties/ppsw/2005/h.n.thu/thesis.pdf>)
- "The Definite Article: Acknowledging 'The' in Index Entries (http://www.theindexer.org/files/22-3/22-3_119.pdf)," Glenda Browne, The Indexer, vol. 22, no. 3 April 2001, pp. 119-22.
- Low MH 2005: "The Phenomenon of the Word THE in English - discourse functions and

distribution patterns" (<http://cf.linguistlist.org/cfdocs/new-website/LL-WorkingDirs/pubs/diss/browse-diss-action.cfm?DissID=11895>) - a dissertation that surveys the use of the word 'the' in English text.

- The Commonest Word in the Language: The social role of the word "the" (<http://home.bluemarble.net/~langmin/miniatures/the.htm>)
- Articles - a Foundation (<http://www.englicious.com/Lessons/Articles/eArticles-AFoundation01.php>) - an educational resource for explaining articles to speakers of foreign languages

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